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AUTHOR Rocchio, Fred D.
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ABSTRACT

In order to increase their writing effectiveness, junior high school students are required to write three drafts of an essay. There are no corrections on the first draft, but a numerical code is placed in the margin to point out any errors in mechanics or problems with content which might be eliminated. Students are given a dittoed copy of twenty-eight numbered errors or problems. For example, if "11" is written in the margin, the student knows from the guide sheet that what he has written is awkward and needs to be rewritten for clarity. The students' text explains the concept, offers examples, and allows the students to review. A brief note of commendation or suggestion is included on the first draft and the papers are returned so that students can write second drafts using the guide sheet, grammar texts, and the teacher's comments. Both drafts are collected and checked for corrected or repeated errors in mechanics and improvement in content. The students use their corrected second drafts and sources to write their final drafts. (SW)

Essay Correction: Teacher's Ease--Students' Profit--Guaranteed Results

Fred D. Rocchio

Before I get to my presentation, let me offer you a preliminary thought for your consideration. After becoming a chairman several years ago, I began to attend the annual conference. I am sorry to say that I left each one with a feeling of frustration and the gnawing thoughts that I had wasted time and money and had left my kids with a substitute but had gained little for my troubles. My negative reaction grew out of a feeling that much too much of what I had heard was nebulous and esoteric. I felt that I had experienced little or nothing which was realistic enough for me to bring back to my department.

Admittedly, I am very much a traditionalist in education, but with an open mind — I hope. I, therefore, took my open mind and questioned as many people as I could each year to determine their feelings and reactions. I honestly say that — almost totally — they agreed with me.

When I began to plan for this year's conference, the gnawing negativism began again. "OK, big mouth," I said to myself, "it's your organization. What do you have to offer?" And so I wrote a summary of my presentation and submitted it to the program chairman for his consideration.

I was overwhelmed — and gratified — with the immediacy of his response and his acceptance of my idea.

Why am I telling you all of this when it has nothing to do with my topic? It's really very simple. I don't want you to labor under the same misapprehension that kept me silent for so long. Believe it or not, but it's true: The people who present programs at the conference are really no different from me — or you, or you. They are not God's spokesmen with all of the answers. They are simply teachers who are doing things successfully and are willing to share their ideas.

Think about what you are doing. Remember some of the ideas you've had which worked and which you now tend to take for granted. Write a summary, and send it off to the program chairman. You too might be overwhelmed and gratified by an immediate response and acceptance. It's your organization. Get involved.

I've continued questioning people this year, and I'm happy to say that their answers and what I've heard seem to indicate that the pendulum in education just might be swinging back to reality. I for one certainly hope so.

Now that that's off my chest, what in the realm of reality do I have to offer you? A technique — a process — in essay correction which I truly hope you will try.

How many of you have experienced the frustration of

reading an essay, correcting the errors, evaluating (grading) it, writing a comment or three, returning it, and then have most of the kids look at only the grade and end up throwing away all of your time and effort? Of course. It's been a chronic age-old problem. It goes with the territory. Right? Wrong. I don't think it has to be that way, and here is why.

Several years ago, the man who then was English chairman at Turtle Hook, another teacher, and I were crying the composition blues late in the school year. Our students really weren't writing appreciably better then than they had been in September. In fact, some of them weren't writing any better.

An idea emerged from our commiseration session. I do not know what — if anything — the other two have done with the idea, for they both later transferred to the high school. For my classes, however, the idea gradually developed into a rather quick, simple, and effective process for improving students' writing skills. I am happy to say that other English teachers at Turtle Hook who have tried the process — with or without their own modifications — agree that it works.

Here's how the system operates. Except for essay answers on unit tests, my students write three drafts of an essay.

As I read the first draft, I do not make any corrections. I simply use a numerical code in the margin to point out any errors in mechanics or problems with content which might be eliminated. A number "1," for example, means a spelling error; "2" means a run-on sentence; "3" means fragment, etc. In total, I have twenty-eight numbered errors or problems on my list, a Ditto copy of which the students have. In the majority of instances of punctuation errors, "6" in the margin very likely will not suffice. Which one of the multitude of possible punctuation errors might it be? I have therefore modified the code: A circled number (which is most often accompanied by a letter) tells the student to look in the grammar text at the designated chapter (the number) and the designated concept (the letter) in order to learn what his problem is and how to correct it.

Confused? It's really quite simple. If I write "11" in the margin, the student knows (from the guide sheet I have given him) that what he has written is awkward and needs to be rewritten for clarity. If, on the other hand, I write a circled "23i" in the margin, he knows he should look at item "i" in Chapter 23. There he will learn that he has written a non-restrictive clause or phrase, which requires punctuation.

The text explains the concept and offers examples, and the student recognizes the construction which he has written and learns where and why the punctuation is needed. A side benefit results because the student is reviewing and reinforcing previously taught concepts, or he is beginning to develop some familiarity with new ones.

After I have finished with the student's first draft, I always include a brief note of commendation and/or suggestions to him. I then return the set of papers to the class so that they can write their second drafts. Each student uses the guide sheet, his grammar text, and my note (and me, if things are not clear) as his resources for writing his second draft. When they are finished, I collect both drafts so that I can check for corrected or repeated errors in the mechanics of writing as well as for the degree of improvement in content. I follow the same steps on the second draft that I used on the first; this time, however, there are almost always fewer problems.

After I return the first two drafts to the students, they use their second draft (and the previously mentioned resources) as they write their final draft. I collect all three, read and evaluate the third (pointing out new and/or repeated errors), add a final note of commendation and/or suggestions,

and return all three to the students.

It works! Believe me, it does!

The student and I can see an improvement from draft to draft; and, because I recommend that he save all of his papers chronologically in his binder notebook, he can also see the marked improvement as the year and he progress. In fact, in the case of serious students, a third draft often is unnecessary quite early in the school year.

In my opinion, the process works because the student makes his own corrections and improvements. After all, most teachers agree that writing problems exist because of ignorance, misunderstanding, or (very often) bad writing habits; and the process helps the student overcome each of these pitfalls.

It's worth a try — if only because it's a faster, easier, and more pleasant process for the teacher. He will no longer experience the frustration of seeing his time and efforts in reading, correcting, evaluating, commending, and suggesting ignored by the student who looks at the paper only to determine the grade he earned and then throws the paper away. Primarily, however, it's worth a try because it <u>does</u> result in an appreciable improvement in students' writing skills.

We use the Warriner series of grammar texts, published

by Harcourt Brace Jovanovitch, but the process obviously can be used with any grammar or writing text.

Any teacher, even teachers in other subject areas, can make very good use of the process if he is serious about wanting to help his students improve their writing skills. Use the process as it is, or modify it to suit yourself. In whatever way you decide to use it, I'm almost willing to guarantee its success — if you give it a fair trial and if your students understand their part of the job and the benefits to be gained.

Let me add one final thought — one which is admittedly rather selfish. I've given you an idea. With questions, you can now proceed to pick my brain a little more. I'd like the opportunity to pick yours if I can. If you try the process, let me know how successfully it works for you and whether or not you have modified it in any way. Write to Fred D. Rocchio, English Chairman, Turtle Hook Junior High School, Uniondale, New York 11553.

GUIDE SHEET FOR COMPOSITION CORRECTION Mr. Rocchio

The following code will be used on all compositions. At first glance, it may seem absolutely confusing; very soon, however, you will find that it is really quite simple. Of greatest importance to you is the fact that, if you work at the job sincerely, you will soon notice that the quality of your writing has improved with each essay that you write.

An uncircled number indicates the problem; for example, an uncircled #5 means you have a problem in paragraphing. A circled number and letter tell you where in the grammar text you will learn what the problem is and how to correct it; for example, a circled (3-b) means to look in chapter 3 item b for an explanation of what the problem is and how to correct it.

1 - Spelling

2 - Run-on sentence

3 - Fragment - not a sentence

4 - Rambles on and on and on andonandonandon

5 - Paragraphing error ¶ is the symbol for paragraph

6- Punctuation error - most often designated by circled numbers and letters

7 - Verb problem

8 - Lack of agreement - problem in agreement between subject and verb or pronoun and antecedent

9 - Pronoun reference

10 - Pronoun case

11 - Awkward - lacks smoothness; restate your idea

12 - Capitalization error

13 - Diction - vocabulary (word choice) problem

14 - Penmanship

15 - Italics - error in underlining

16 - Apostrophe error

17 - Continuity - The flow of your ideas is not smooth; you probably broke the thread by jumping from idea to idea; restate

18 - Vague - not clear

19 - Sloppy paper!

20 - Not at all clear! - a much greater problem than #18; restate with care, clarity, and directness

21 - Slang - generally not acceptable

22 - Quotation marks error

23 - Degree of modifier error

24 - Style - usually caused by lack of variety in sentence structure

25 - Fact error

26 - Preposition choice

27 - Modifier error - dangling or misplaced

28 - Not relevant - does not relate; has nothing to do with what you have written; or has nothing to do with the topic